

AMMPARO

Accompanying Migrants with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities

Introduction to the 40-day Bible and Prayer Challenge and the AMMPARO Scripture Bookmark

*Dedicated to the memory of the Rev. Gordon J. Straw, a great theologian, teacher, friend,
and colleague in the ELCA, lost too soon to cancer in January 2019*

Thank you for your interest in exploring what God has instructed us regarding our treatment of the alien, the foreigner or, in some cases, the stranger among us! Depending on your Bible translation, you may see a different word. We hope that you will find the 40-day Bible and Prayer Challenge to be an important devotional practice, helping you to see not only what God requires of us but also, in the accompanying prayer time, new directions for your ministry or a strengthened commitment to walk with the most vulnerable around us.

Having completed this 40-day Bible and Prayer Challenge at least half a dozen times over the last three years, I can say that each time it inspires my work as program director of AMMPARO and increases my advocacy actions. I love the way each verse highlights new areas of accompaniment of the migrant community. Some of the verses talk about hospitality, others talk about the law, and still others talk about labor rights, but each helps me to grow. One clear message we receive through this study is that migration is not a new phenomenon. Our biblical ancestors had to work through being and receiving migrants, both!

While many people have used this spiritual exercise in Lent or Advent, it works for the Epiphany season as well as the Easter season. It has been done during Lent at the ELCA churchwide organization offices as a daily devotion, in congregations as their Lenten study, and with small groups all over the ELCA. Now in four languages, soon to be five, it has been shared with our ELCA companions in Latin America and Europe and soon will be shared with Chinese-speakers here and with our companions in Asia. It has also been shared with our elected representatives in Congress and state legislatures who profess to be Christian, to encourage dialogue around immigration issues. Perhaps you will be moved to share a bookmark with your representative or senator and ask them to take the 40-day Bible and Prayer Challenge with you!

While we as Lutherans always pay attention to the whole context of a Bible passage in our Bible study and are not supportive of the use of individual Bible verses as a kind of proof text for theological positions, you are certainly encouraged to expand your study to include helpful contextualization. **ONE CAUTIONARY NOTE** that needs to be taken into consideration is that one verse, Jeremiah 7:7, has been identified by some Indigenous people as reinforcing the belief of “manifest destiny” among dominant immigrant groups.

The thousands of Indigenous groups that have inhabited the lands known to many Indigenous people as Turtle Island (what Europeans renamed North America) for time immemorial possess creation stories that place their existence here from the beginning. It is necessary/good to respect/appreciate this placement and belief, which of course negates the oppressive and dominating claim that Turtle Island belonged to no one because it wasn't "civilized" or "Christian" prior to European/colonizer arrival. And despite the debate posed by European-descent immigrants and settlers today that science supports a similar claim ...

Upon their arrival and since, European immigrants and settlers and others treated Indigenous people as if they were animals, less than human, developing policies and taking actions that encouraged the decimation of all Indigenous peoples. This in the name of God, driven by the desire to steal Indigenous lands and by the doctrine/philosophy known as manifest destiny.

Reading Jeremiah 7:7, I believe that those of us who are European American descendants need to be careful not to interpret this verse, or any biblical verse for that matter, as proof that manifest destiny is anything more than a Christian fail. Instead, we must uphold that respect for the rights and God-given dignity of each of us is paramount, especially for our siblings from Indigenous communities long experiencing murder and marginalization from European invaders, colonizers, settlers, Christians.

When I first was presented with the concerns about this verse, I had the privilege of talking with the Rev. Gordon Straw, a friend and former colleague, to help me discern what steps to take here. To gain a basic understanding, he suggested that I read Robert Allen Warrior's very helpful article "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians." It can be found in the book entitled *Native and Christian* by James Treat, and I quote. "Keeping the Canaanites at the center [of Christian theological and reflection and political action] makes it more likely that those who read the Bible will read all of it, not just the part that inspires and justifies them" (p. 6).

Rev. Straw also suggested that, to hear a range of important Indigenous voices and to take a deeper dive, I read *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* by James Treat (Routledge, 1996). This is a text that he used when he taught Native American theology and spirituality. It includes the abovementioned article by Robert Allen Warrior but also key articles by William Baldrige ("Reclaiming Our Histories") and George Tinker ("Spirituality, Native American Personhood, Sovereignty and Solidarity") and a whole host of other extremely important articles. I would commend both of these resources to you.

Another helpful resource for me has been Emilie Townes' book *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, in which she talks about Christian triumphalism and one of the current themes that the United States is a Christian nation. She states, "History is messy, far from antiseptic, and often not kind. Although we sometimes remember that God acts in history, we often lapse into thinking that we are alone in this unfolding of creation and then we proceed to make God a partner in our wishes (rather than we being a partner in God's wishes) and then believe that God chooses to be on our side. In short, we hold God hostage if not prisoner as we, the faithful followers assume God's will" (p. 91).

Thank you for your commitment to reflecting on God's word, praying, and taking action for the protection of God's vulnerable people, including the alien in our midst.

Special thanks to Vance Blackfox, a citizen of the Cherokee Nation who serves as director of communications for the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. A graduate of both Texas Lutheran University and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Vance, who edited this introduction, is founder and producer of the Vine Deloria Jr. Symposium, hosted annually by LSTC, and is the founder and director of Other+Wise, a multisite cultural education and immersion program for youth from across the country.

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